

ARTICLE APPEARED  
 ON PAGE 1

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR  
 13 May 1986

# Secret contacts on 'contras'

## Honduras, Nicaragua share intelligence to avert war

By Paul Glickman  
 Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Honduras has been holding secret military and political talks with Nicaragua's Sandinista government, according to diplomatic and military sources in both countries.

In these contacts, Honduras has shared intelligence information about the United States-backed Nicaraguan "contra" rebels with the Sandinistas. And Nicaragua has indirectly warned Honduras before attacking contra bases inside this country, the sources say.

The reason that the pro-US Hondurans are talking to the Soviet-backed Sandinistas, the sources say, is that both countries want to avoid going to war over the contras, who are trying to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinistas.

The Honduran military does not want to fight the superior Sandinista Army, and Nicaraguan leaders fear such a conflict could give Washington a pretext to invade their country.

"It's logical that there is direct communication," a Honduran political analyst says. "The Hondurans don't want to clash with the Sandinistas. They understand that it isn't [Honduras's] war, it's the contras' war."

While the US has not commented on the Honduran-Nicaraguan talks, observers agree that the Reagan administration views the contacts as a threat to its strategy of isolating Nicaragua.

"I don't know what to make of [the reported talks]," a US Embassy official in Honduras says, "because I don't know about them." But the official expressed skepticism about the reported extent of the bilateral discussions. He suggested that the Sandinistas floated rumors about the negotiations as a propaganda ploy.

The quiet talks, observers say, serve as a safety valve for Honduras, which is trying to balance

its desire for peace with Nicaragua with its desire to continue receiving US military and economic assistance. Honduras is Washington's closest ally in Central America and gets more than \$200 million a year in US aid.

For the Sandinistas' part, analysts say, aside from the immediate goal of avoiding war with Honduras, the unofficial talks are being used to drive a wedge between the US and Honduras.

The analysts add, however, that the secret talks do not point to an imminent Honduran break with the Reagan administration over the contra issue. But given the rebels' stalled war effort and the US Congress's refusal so far to approve an extra \$100 million in contra aid, the Honduras-Nicaragua discussions present another obstacle for President Reagan's troubled Nicaragua policy, they say.

Honduras may have passed along information on contra position and troop strength to the Nicaraguans, foreign observers say. But it is assumed that the Sandinistas probably already have access to such information through their own intelligence network. The observers reason that, although the intelligence shared by the Hondurans does not have much strategic value, it is useful as a gesture aimed at building confidence between the two nations.

Although the Honduran government officially denies it, most of the contras' training camps, airstrips, and hospitals are based in this country. It is widely known that the Honduran military coordinates the delivery of foreign aid to the contras. There is no historical enmity between Honduras and Nicaragua, however, and observers agree that the Honduran military leadership sees the contra war as mainly Washington's fight.

The military talks have apparently taken place at the field commander level and the political talks at the level of Cabinet minister on the Honduran side. And, according to informed reports, these discussions have actually affected the course of the contra war.

Four times during the past year, Managua alerted Tegucigalpa that it had knowledge about large numbers of contra troops poised on the border ready to enter Nicaragua, a well-informed diplomatic

source says.

On two occasions, says the source, expected rebel attacks failed to materialize, presumably because the Hondurans told the contras that the Sandinistas knew of the rebels' plans. On two other occasions — May 1985 and late March of this year — Sandinista troops crossed the border after Honduras had been notified of contra buildups. Managua feels justified in attacking the contras in Honduras if Tegucigalpa does nothing to restrain the rebels, says the diplomatic source.

The Sandinistas have been wooing the Hondurans for some years now.

In October 1984, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega Saavedra sent a personal emissary to Tegucigalpa to explore the possibility of creating "an expeditious channel of communication, something like a Central American hot line," says Victor Meza, a leading Honduran intellectual. The envoy, Halima López, met with Honduran politicians and military officials, including the former chief of state, Gen. Oswaldo López Arrellano, Mr. Meza adds.

President Ortega's envoy made another private trip to Honduras during the administration of President Roberto Suazo Córdova (1982-85), and her shuttle diplomacy bore some fruit.

Despite Mr. Suazo's reluctance to deal with the Sandinistas, the two countries' armed forces established limited communications — telephone and radio contacts between military forces on each side of the border — Honduran sources say.

When José Azcona Hoyo became President of Honduras earlier this year, the frequency of confidential contacts increased, Honduran and Nicaraguan sources say. Since President Azcona's inauguration Jan. 27, there have been several contacts at military and political levels, says the well-informed diplomatic source.

Two Honduran Cabinet ministers have held private talks with Nicaraguan leaders during official visits to Managua this spring, the diplomatic source says. There have also been several meetings between military officers along the countries' common border, the diplomat says.

One such meeting, between two Honduran colonels and a Sandinista regional commander, took place as US Vice-President George Bush attended Azcona's inauguration in Tegucigalpa.

Continued

2

Azcona has denied that his government is holding secret talks with Managua. Nicaragua has made no official comment on the reported discussions, either.

According to the Honduran political analyst, Nicaraguan Vice-President Sergio Ramírez Mercado, while visiting Honduras for Azcona's inauguration, asked the new President to help Nicaragua in its efforts to reopen bilateral talks with the Reagan administration.

A reluctant Azcona was persuaded by his advisers to pass a message to the US Embassy expressing Managua's desire to resume talks with Washington. The US State Department never responded to the probe, the analyst says.